Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

28 | Spring 1997
Varia

Professor Fargo (1874) : Henry James's Spirit-Rapper and Body-Snatcher

Sophie Geoffroy-Menoux

OpenEdition Journals

Édition électronique
URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/97
ISSN : 1969-6108

Éditeur
Presses universitaires d'Angers

Édition imprimée
Date de publication : 1 mars 1997
ISSN : 0294-04442

Référence électronique
Sophie Geoffroy-Menoux, « *Professor Fargo* (1874) : Henry James's Spirit-Rapper and Body-Snatcher », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [En ligne], 28 | Spring 1997, mis en ligne le 15 juillet 2008, consulté le 30 avril 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/97

Professor Fargo *(1874) : Henry James's Spirit-Rapper and Body-Snatcher*

Sophie Geoffroy-Menoux

1 *Professor Fargo*, first published in *The Galaxy*, in August 1874, is one of the earliest tales ever published by Henry James. Epitomizing his view of " the American scene, " it was first reprinted in *Travelling Companions*,[1] then in *The Little Blue Book*[2], with a new title (" Spiritual Magnetism "), but never deemed worthy of publication in James's monumental New York edition. Yet, it is particularly interesting in the context of his other ghost stories--especially as regards his appraisal of contemporaneous "Psychical Research. " James's major themes are already present in this bizarre text: the opposition between science and neo-spiritualism, the insistance on the vulgarity inherent in human seduction and in money-making, the fascinated disgust for (theatrical) performance, and even the leitmotiv of the sacrifice of innocence in the face of the dreadful powers of the demonic. Technically speaking, the presence of a narrator-observer used as a " centre of consciousness " is already there, too, as a most important feature in the creation of the uncanny.

2 This story takes place in a setting redolent of Hawthorne's New England, highly suitable for Professor Fargo's " raising of ghosts by the dozen " and Colonel Gifford's intellectual feats as " lightning calculator and mathematical reformer. "

> A Message from the spirit world/The higher mathematics made easy to/Ladies and children/A new revelation! A new science!/Great moral and scientific combination/ Professor Fargo, the infallible waking medium and/magician, clairvoyant, prophet and seer!/Colonel Gifford, the famous lightning calculator/and mathematical reformer!

3 The self-styled medium's talent for hypnosis (" animal magnetism ") is pitted against his colleague's scientific talents; the two men are in fact itinerant geniuses who, accompanied by the latter's seventeen-year-old deaf and dumb daughter, exhibit their supranormal powers for a living, just like circus artists or freaks, though less successfully than " the educated elephant and the female trapezist " or " the Canadian Giantess ". The pathetic show performed for money's sake is fraught with symbolic meaning and

disquieting overtones: Professor Fargo's mesmerizing powers, his voraciousness, his ogre-like ocular and mental cannibalism cannot but evoke, in the modern reader's mind, the idea of scopic penetration.

4 The entire story being placed under the aegis of the American identity, a national flag--however " dingy a specimen " (260)-- is, literally, unfurled from the start. But everything American appears degraded. The few references to historical figures are ludicrously trivial: " It was George Washington. . . . who said that people should wash their dirty linen at home " (287). Henry James, almost a naturalist here, sensitive to people's misery, especially in great cities[3], questions the ethical value of the predominance of economic factors over people's lives. In fact, James's picture of the " American scene " is very close to the embarrassing picture he will draw in his essay on *Hawthorne* (1879). Told by a commercial traveller stranded in an out-of-the-way New England village, and whose peregrinations the reader follows down to New York, the story insists on " the dulness of the landscape " (259), its stillness (" a weariness to the spirit ") constantly broken by the jarring, nerve-racking note of the steam-whistle of the train, and turned into " a trial for the flesh " by " the primitive condition of the road " (259). Secondary characters are a mixture of " Yankee shrewdness " (262) and stodgy provincialism, among whom silence prevails, because of " that whimsical retention of speech which is such a common form of American sociability " (286). Wondering about " their speechless solemnity ", he wryly concludes : " it may have been partly faith, but (it) was certainly partly rum " (285).

5 In a capitalist world dominated by a ruling passion embodied by stereotyped " Judaic " (!) landlords, this Romantic salesman's gloomy thoughts and other-worldly concerns tend to associate money with the themes of death and ghosts, with the people themselves made unreal, dehumanized by money, literally *ghosted*. " I felt very little merrier than a graveyard ghost " (260), he confesses. Money-making public performances look like prostitution; the " Combination " turns into a trinity of freakish figures (the quack, the freak and the circus artist) whose exhibitions become almost obscene, from the moment when, in exchange for the settling of accounts, Miss Gifford is dragged into the show. The performance is soon based on the sacrifice of innocence on the altar of profit: her handicap is her capital. But no amount of rhetoric tricks can conceal or alter the fact that their status is even lower than that of circus artists.

> Professor Fargo's . . . miracles were exclusively miracles of rhetoric. He discoursed upon the earth life and the summer land, and related surprising anecdotes of his intimacy with the inhabitants of the latter region; but to my disappointment, the evening passed away without his really bringing us face to face with a ghost. . . With three or four young girls the thing was a trifle better. One of them closed her eyes and shivered; another had a fearful access of nervous giggling; another burst into tears and was restored to her companions with an admonitory wink. (269)

6 " The ignoble need of keeping the body and soul together " (283), has thrown even Colonel Gifford into Fargo's clutches; yet, avowedly relying on Franklin's credo, he has created a time-saving machine, meant for computation[4]. Even though his genius, his Quixotic " honesty " and his visionary powers stand in direct opposition to the spiritualist imposture, Colonel Gifford is a *savant fou* sadly clowning about like a performing monkey.

7 But this committed story is above all a tale of the occult. The narrator, on discovering the epitaphs of the cemetery--" posterior to the age of theological *naïveté* " (265)--insists on the modern loss of faith, but ruthlessly discards " Methodist tracts " together with a pile of farmers' almanacs. This gives us a clue as to how Henry James reacted to the various religious doctrines which had given birth, in the State of New York, as early as 1848, to

neo-spiritualism[5], which had quickly structured itself (*Society for the Diffusion of Spiritual Knowledge* (June 1854); *British National Association for Spiritualists* (1872). Contrary to the " old," essentially religious, spiritualism, that had considered material reality as shaped by and composed of spiritual forces totally out of science's reach, neo-spiritualists capitalized on the hypothesis that conscience was essentially material, thus available to scientific methods, and, paradoxically, questioning the existence of God.

8 But its very syncretism was to be the source of conflicts within the Society itself, between the champions of the spiritual thesis (Henry James Senior was one of them) and those advocating the materialist thesis. The former, after Paracelsus, and just like Professor Fargo, claimed that their favourite method (hypnosis) was akin to the alchemists' concept of animal magnetism, and claimed idealist Swedenborg as their spiritual father[6]. The craze for such mediumnic spirit-rappings was immense, but its credibility was to flag considerably: in the late 1870s, as is shown here, the public mostly shared Henry James's suspicions.

9 Revealingly enough, in James's work, (neo)spiritualism, is recurrently linked to the disappointing image of inadequate fatherhood. Although his letters testify to the sense of lack he felt because he belonged to no church in particular, he was too disappointed by his father's philosopho-religious system ever to join transcendentalism, even if he did try [7], attending, on the same day, a Presbyterian service, followed by a visit to Mrs. Cora V. L. Hatch, whose spectacular preaching had unfortunately been preceded by an obstrusively grandiloquent mountebank's introduction (" probably Mr. Chorus V. L. Hatch ") and followed by her begging for an outrageous retribution. As Cora Hatch was a very famous medium, it is interesting to notice here how Henry James mixes the Presbyterian cult and mediumnic shows. In fact, his texts show that, contrary to what Leon Edel affirms--Henry James's religion was " a mysticism compounded of meditation and communion with spirits and forces vaguely discerned yet acutely felt, in a dim intuitional 'beyond', "[8] his speculations on conscience never lead to any conventional religious or metaphysical formula.

10 The conflict between the quack, and the scientist fictionally represents the debate over psychical cases, a debate which opposed the new sciences, especially the New Psychology, to Neo-spiritualism, within the *London Dialectical Society* which as early as 1871 had authenticated occult phenomena. This debate (echoed here) over the source of mesmerization and telepathy proved creatively fatal to the Society[9], since it resulted in the creation of the famous Society for Psychical Research (1882). The purpose of the SPR was to apply the methods of the exact sciences to the study of paranormal phenomena authenticated by mediums' testimonies--a magnificent source of inspiration for writers of uncanny tales of the occult: *unheimlich*, as Freud *did not* note, also refers to someone " well versed in occult or exceptional practices " (S. Kofman)[10]. In this sense, Professor Fargo and Colonel Gifford alike are *unheimlich. . .*

11 This short story thus offers us one of the clearest expressions of what Henry James Jr thought of the mediumnic experiments carried out by his brother William James and his fellow psychiatrists, linked, as we are nowadays aware, to the discovery of the subconscious. In fact, no other fiction offers us more than a glimpse of Henry James's relation to the occult, ghost-raising and ghosting. We might indeed infer that Henry James was, at that time, a firm believer in " chemistry, physics, mathematics, philology, medicine, " Colonel Gifford, being a mouthpiece for this: " science recognizes no such thing as 'spiritual magnetism'; no such thing as mysterious fascinations; no such thing as

spirit-rappings and ghost-raisings. " (287) Yet, Professor Fargo's " free gift " can be evidenced too: " You go by facts: I'll give you facts. " (288)

12 It may be argued that, in 1874, before the International Congress of Psychology (1889, 1892, 1896, and 1900), when the fifth section devoted its session to " the psychology of hypnotism, suggestion and associated issues, " and before the *Studien über Hysterie* published by Freud and Breuer (1893), the failure of Colonel Gifford was predictable. It may similarly be argued that William James's younger brother, had foreseen both the mystical drawbacks and the tremendous impact of his brother's favourite method (hypnosis): the very name " Fargo " echoes that of Charcot, the famous doctor at the Salpêtrière, and precursor of Freud and William James, while the name of Gifford echoes that of the place where William James gave his famous " *Gifford* lectures on Natural religion delivered at Edinburgh " later published in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*... Professor Fargo's séances do dramatize the exhibition of the mind's " unconscious cerebration ", a phrase coined in 1853 by W. B. Carpenter and used by Henry James in *The Art of the Novel.* Fargo's experiments inevitably remind us of William James'suse of the phrase " subliminal area " or " B-region "[11], said to

> (contain), for example, such things as all our momentarily inactive memories,and (harbor) the springs of all our obscurely motived passions, impulses, likes, dislikes, and prejudices. Our intuitions, hypotheses, fancies, superstitions, persuasions, convictions, and in general all our non-rational operations, come from it. . . It is the source of our dreams. . . In it arise whatever mystical experiences we may have, and our automatisms, sensory or motor; our life in hypnotic and 'hypnoid' conditions. . . our delusions, fixed ideas, and hysterical accidents. . . our supranormal cognitions. . . if we are telepathic subjects (*Varieties* 483-4)[12].

13 We are indeed, at that point in James's life, very far from the position he will defend in 1908, in his famous Preface to *The Turn of the Screw*.

> The new type indeed, the mere modern 'psychical' case, washed clean of all queerness as by exposure to a flowing laboratory tap, and equipped with credentials vouching for it, this new type clearly promised little, for the more it was respectably certified, the less it seemed of a nature to rouse the dear old sacred terror.

14 The " dear old sacred terror " is roused here by another motif: " emotional cannibalism ". *Professor Fargo* is one of these jamesian tales in which " the ceremony of innocence is drowned. "[13] With the innocent child (Miss Gifford) caught between a dejected father figure and a domineering quack, the tale is powerfully structured around the motive of perfect innocence/ignorance appallingly forced to face parental weaknesses. In this perspective, the portrait of the leonine Professor Fargo, and more particularly his disquieting eyes--" the most impudent pair of eyes I ever beheld " (262)-- and devilish red hair, are meant to insist on the sensuous nature of this character. His appetite for food, frequently alluded to, stands for his lust for young, tender bodies and pliant souls, his thirst for ocular, or mental vampirism, and even " scopic penetration. " His portrait is definitely that of a rake, gradually endowed with all the features of the traditional " demon lover ":

> [His] mass of reddish hair was tossed back from his forehead in a leonine fashion, and a lustrous auburn beard diffused itself complacently over an expansive but by no means immaculate shirt front. . . . it was in keeping with the festal pattern of his garment, that on the right forefinger of a large, fat hand, he should wear an immense turquoise ring. (261)

15 Miss Gifford, an " exquisite creature of 17 " (263), is inexplicably " spellbound ", arranging secret rendez-vous in the cemetery with Fargo (265). Although, intellectually speaking, she is " a genius ", endowed as she is with " a (gift) rare among women, " although she is like a fairy sprite, (" ... she is not of the common feminine stuff " (280)), she falls an easy prey to Fargo's *unheimlich* charms.

16 The father himself, a genuine *savant fou*, blinded by occasionnal fits of idealism and " rhapsodies of transcendental thought, " dazed by the " mighty human hum of the great city, " abjectly subjected to Fargo's domination, has spent his life and squandered his property as well as his wife's in " a carnival of high research, a long debauch of experiment, " even, like a mediaeval alchemist (278) " melting down (his) last cent in the consuming crucible. . . " (280). Henry James's dislike for marriage and wives can be detected in the narrator's sympathy for this impassioned scientist, whose sole preoccupation at the time of his marriage was " . . . a series of curious chemical researches " (279) and who finally caused his Pandora-like wife to lose her sense of hearing in a terrific explosion. The sins of the fathers are, moreover, visited on the children, since the child inherited her mother's handicap, and was born deaf and dumb. A staunch opponent to the notion of property, he spends his leisure time, contrary to Fargo's well-paid private or public " raisings ", offering private lessons to village urchins and " juvenile Newtons. " Such motherly sollicitude and weaknesses are suggested by his almost feminine voice. Ironically enough considering his manly title (Colonel), he evinces a mixture of half-pity half-reverence, like elderly people rumored to " be 'cracked,' in short, like a fine bit of porcelain which will hold together only so long as you don't push it about " (272). His flaw, as soon becomes apparent, is his inability to recognize the force of the subconscious or " unconscious cerebration. "

17 The parable swerves into horror, when Professor Fargo, as a proof of his supranormal powers on *living* beings, challenges Colonel Gifford: the Colonel's daughter is the stake of this gamble. Asked to choose between her father and him, " for all answer, after caressing him a moment with her gentle gaze, she dropped before him on her knees. . . He caught the young girl round the waist, and made a triumphant escape. " (298)

18 The tale thus ends on the victory of the " body- (and soul-) snatcher " and " demonic lover, " Professor Fargo's animal (i.e. sexual) magnetism over the young girl, in the face of the scientist. As he is forced to witness the loss of innocence in the very clutches of corruption and evil, his sorrow drives him mad: " it became evident that the asylum would have to be for him ". There, as the narrator assures us, he " spends his days covering little square sheets of paper with algebraic signs but . . . they represent no coherent mathematical operation. " Miss Gifford has now become a bread-winning feature in Professor Fargo's new show.

19 *Professor Fargo* inaugurates those texts in which human heterosexual relations are dramatized as modern transpositions of the traditional vampire pattern, in which Eros and Thanatos are linked. This strange pattern can be traced back to Henry James's biography[14]. Here animal magnetism and spiritual vampirism are equivalent as is the case in his other texts based on the motif of vampirism (spiritual or other) and (neo-)spiritualism, from " De Grey: A Romance " (July 1868) to the novel *The Sacred Fount* (1901) or even *The Bostonians* or *The Wings of the Dove*. In fact, in keeping with the sexual connotations of a long tradition, the bonds that exist between the hypnotist and his " vampirized " victim, disturbingly reveal their ambiguous/ambivalent feelings for one

another. Concerning the relations between Miss Gifford and Professor Fargo, even the narrator privately wonders " . . . if the 'little maid' was so perfectly ignorant of evil as the old man supposed " (284), while the swaggering Professor's vanity makes it a duty for him to take revenge of his partner's contempt. (285) A discreetly sado-masochistic structure indeed.

20 It is, finally, extremely interesting to detect, as early as this 1874 story, the concentration of effect obtained because the prodigy is refracted by the narrator-observer's conscience which registers it, amplifies it, interprets it, thus foreshadowing James's long list of " centers of consciousness " and other " men of imagination. " Although a sense of complicity with the characters observed is gradually established, he might ultimately be considered as *the* vampire, who, under cover of his sympathy for them, secretly gloats over the infernal trio. But the lesson he learns, similar to that inflicted on the narrator in *The Sacred Fount*, is a pessimistic one :

> I saw as I had never seen before what consuming passion can make of the marked individual on whom, with fixed beak and claws, it has settled as on a prey. [...] *So it was brought home to me that the victim could be abased, and so it disengaged itself from these things that the abasement could be conscious (Sacred Fount*, 135-6).

NOTES

1. *Travelling Companions* , New York: Boni & Liveright, 1919.

2. *The Little Blue Book,* n° 1674, Girard (Arkansas) Haldeman-Julius, 27 Aug. 1931.

3. He describes for instance, "a row of squalid tenements (which) faced us, and half a dozen Irish raggamuffins (who) were sprawling beneath our feet, between their doorway and the gutter." (293)

4. "In America alone. . . it would save the business community about 23,000 hours in the course of ten years. If time is money, they are worth saving." (278)

5. "One is the four Gospels; another is Emersonianism, New England transcendentalism; another is Berkeleyan idealism; another is spiritism, with its messages of 'law' and 'progress' and 'development'; another the optimistic popular science evolutionism [. . .]; and finally Hinduism has contributed a strain." William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p.94.

6. The eighteenth century theosopher had dreamt of founding a natural science of the supernatural world. His fundamental idea was the existence of corespondences between the visible and the invisible realm; theses correspondences being the basis of all existing things, as well as of connection betwwen angels and human beings; they develop a system of"doubles" eternally striving for reunion. Henry James Senior had written a book on *The Secret of Swedenborg.*

7. See his famous letter (dated Nov. 1863) to T. S. Perry for an account of his latest religious experiments on a "boring" spleen-inspiring rainy sunday.

8. Leon Edel, *The Untried Years (1843-1870)* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), p.115.

9. Some believed the "voices" heard by the patients to be uttered by dead people's spirits, others thought they emanated from the hypnotist's magnetic fluid.

10. Sarah Kofman, *Quatre romans analytiques* (Paris: Galilée, 1973), p.164.

11. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1902); pp.433 & 483.

12. Ibid

13. Yeats quoted by Benjamin Britten in *The Turn of the Screw* , op. 64. London: Hawkes & Sons, 1955.

14. Here is Henry James's account of the intense guilt feeling roused by the death of his beloved cousin: he is particularly upset by what he considered as the coincidence of her fatal decline and his own improving health: "I slowly crawling from weakness and inaction and suffering into strength and health and hope: she sinking out of brightness and youth into decline and death. [. . .] It's almost as if she had passed away from having served her purpose, that of standing well within the world, inviting and inviting me onward by all the bright intensity of her example." Letter to William James, quoted in Leon Edel, *The Untried Years, op. cit.,* p.28.

RÉSUMÉS

Professor Fargo met en scène une trinité de personnages marginaux (le charlatan, le savant fou et l'infirme) vedettes d'un spectacle médiumnique dont le narrateur va suivre la tournée à travers l'Amérique : le professeur Fargo, « médium infaillible, magicien, voyant, prophète et visionnaire,» le Colonnel Gifford, mathématicien hors pair, et sa fille de dix-sept ans sourde et muette. La nouvelle développe le thème du conflit entre la science et la parapsychologie. Mais la fantaisie de la parabole bascule dans l'horreur lorsque Fargo décide de démontrer que son magnétisme animal peut agir sur des êtres vivants: l'enjeu du pari est la propre fille de Gifford. Le conte s'achève sur la victoire de l'infâme magnétisme animal (en vérité sexuel) de Fargo sur la jeune fille innocente. Ils disparaissent à jamais, sous les yeux horrifiés de l'honnête scientifique, rendu fou de douleur par la perte de son enfant ravie par la force d'une volonté corrompue.

AUTEURS

SOPHIE GEOFFROY-MENOUX

Université de La Réunion